

Committee on Resources

Subcommittee on National Parks & Public Lands

Witness Statement

The Honorable Ciro D. Rodriguez
Member of Congress, 28th District of Texas
Testimony before the
House Committee on Resources
Subcommittee on National Parks and Public Lands
HR 2409, the Camino Real de los Tejas National Historic Trail Act
May 9, 2000

MR. CHAIRMAN and members of the subcommittee, I thank you for scheduling today's hearing on my legislation to designate El Camino Real de los Tejas, or the Royal Highway of Texas, as a National Historic Trail. Passage of this legislation would give us the tools to preserve precious resources, highlight a unique and important time in our history, and create new opportunities for cultural tourism.

Last Congress, the Senate considered legislation similar, though not identical, to H.R.2409, the bill before the Subcommittee today. In 1998, after favorable consideration by the Senate Committee on Energy and Natural Resources, the Senate passed S 2276, the El Camino Real de los Tejas National Historic Trail Act of 1998, by unanimous consent. The House did not take up S 2276, nor the companion bill I introduced, HR 4724.

At the time, some expressed concern to me about the potential impact of the proposed trail designation on private property rights. Although I believed then that the bill as drafted would not harm private property rights in any way, I added language to ensure beyond any doubt that the legislation would be private property rights friendly. In drafting the changes, my office worked with the National Park Service and consulted with a number of organizations and individuals interested in the protection of private property rights.

I introduced HR 2409 this Congress with the following language to protect private property interests:

Designation of El Camino Real de los Tejas does not itself confer any additional authority to apply other existing Federal laws and regulations on non-Federal lands along the trail. Laws or regulations requiring public entities and agencies to take into consideration a national historic trail shall continue to apply notwithstanding the foregoing. On non-Federal lands, the national historic trail shall be established only when landowners voluntarily request certification of their sites and segments of the trail consistent with section 3(a)(3) of this Act. Notwithstanding section 7(g), the United States is authorized to acquire privately-owned real property or an interest in such property for purposes of the trail only with the willing consent of the owner of such property and shall have no authority to condemn or otherwise appropriate privately-owned real property or an interest in such property for the purposes of such trail.

It is my belief that this language is as protective of property rights as possible, and property rights organizations have indicated to my office their approval of this language. For the record, I attach a letter I recently received from Ms. Patsy Light, who indicates that she is a fifth generation owner of property along the trail and strongly supports the legislation's ability to enhance historical preservation in a manner that fully protects the rights of landowners.

Trail designation also enjoys widespread support in Texas and Louisiana. Cities, counties and a variety of organizations have endorsed the passage of this legislation. For the record, I attach a booklet including copies of all the resolutions we have collected as of April 8, 2000. We expect to receive more in the next weeks and months. These organizations represent tens of thousands of individuals who would benefit from trail designation.

Granting the Camino Real de los Tejas the status of a national historic trail would recognize the road's significant historical and cultural importance to the development of the United States and modern North America. This camino real, or royal highway, forged the way for the early development of Texas into a Spanish colony, an independent Republic, and a great state in our nation. As the first major highway into Texas and Louisiana, this camino real opened the door to trade and cultural exchange and continues to impact our lives today.

The Camino Real de los Tejas represents a series of roads and trails extending for more than 1,000 miles from Mexico City to the Rio Grande, to San Antonio and then to East Texas and Louisiana. These early Indian trails developed by the Spanish into routes of exploration, missionary work and colonization. The earliest Spanish route stems back to the travels of Alonso de León in 1689. During the next 150 years, explorers, traders, ranchers, immigrants, armies and missionaries blazed a series of trails through South Texas to San Antonio and through to the east.

Designation of the trail will help enhance tourism and economic development in the many cities and towns along the trail system. Local museums and historical sites will be given new opportunities for growth. The San Antonio Missions National Historical park, an important and beautiful network of missions in the San Antonio area, can provide a base of operations for trail activities.

A number of public roads, state parks and national forest areas could serve as points of public access to this important piece of our history. A national trail would provide links to numerous existing public and private resources, from Los Adaes State Commemorative Area in Louisiana, to the Mission Nuestra Señora de los Dolores de los Ais in San Augustine, Texas, to the diverse resources of the San Antonio Missions National Historical Park, Goliad State Park and McKinney Falls State Park in Central Texas, to the San Agustín Laredo Historic District at the Republic of the Rio Grande Museum in Laredo along the Rio Grande. These are but a few examples of the many public and private resources already existing that could take advantage of the trail designation.

What is perhaps unique about the Camino Real de los Tejas is that it remains a source of cultural exchange and development. The State of Texas, as long ago as 1929, recognized the historical significance of portions of the Camino Real de los Tejas in establishing the Old San Antonio Road in East Texas. Since that time local communities have to varying degrees promoted the Camino Real as a source of history and tourism. Making the entire Camino Real a national historic trail would enhance these local efforts, offering for the first time the real possibility of coordinated research, preservation, and cultural tourism.

In South Texas, local communities came together a number of years ago to form the El Camino Real

Market Trail. They meet monthly and publish a regular newsletter. One of their subcommittees has pulled together a network of local, rural museums to pool resources and explore ways to expand their mission of preserving the past for the education of future generations.

They and the various communities in which they operate would greatly benefit from the technical assistance the National Park Service could provide following trail designation. I envision these museums working as close partners with the Park Service to create a public/private partnership that will promote tourism and preserve an essential piece of our history. Academic institutions, working with local entities and the National Park Service, could create a great corridor of learning for area residents and visitors alike. Ultimately, we can create partnerships with Mexican institutions and governments and create not only a national, but also an international, trail for generations to come.

We have the opportunity, by designating the Camino Real de los Tejas as a national historic trail, to preserve our past in a way that helps ensure our future. The world of Indian, Spanish, Mexican and Anglo-American exploration of what is now Texas and Louisiana is a unique chapter in our collective national and international history. Mr. Chairman, I hope you will agree with me that designation of the Camino Real de los Tejas as a national historic trail is appropriate and beneficial to our region and the nation.

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